James V. Schall: A Warranted Pessimism?

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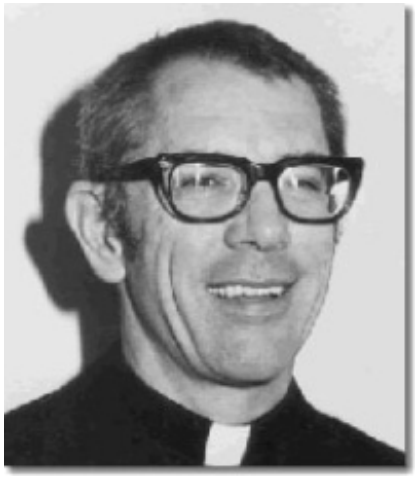
Steven P Millies February 21, 2013

The Modern Age. James V. Schall, S.J. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2011.



Most readers will need little introduction to James V. Schall, S.J. Father Schall is Professor of Government at Georgetown University where, for the last 35 years, he has become one of the most prominent Catholic political theorists in the United States.[FN]

The author of more than thirty books and hundreds of essays, it is difficult to imagine a more distinguished figure in the field. Indeed, Father Schall's eminent position assures that any book-length work he produces commands the attention of serious people interested in political theory. It also makes *The Modern Age* seem perhaps more puzzling than it would seem had it come from the pen of almost any other author.

The Modern Age offers Father Schall's sustained critique of modernity as a dominating cultural and intellectual idea. The most potent charge he levels against the modern age comes in his most vivid diagnosis of it:

How men live is seen against a framework, not of whatever they choose, but of whether what they will choose is right by a standard of what it is to be a redeemed human being (85-86).

It would seem that the nucleus of whatever we mean by "the modern age" must be the sense of human mastery over nature that derives from the Renaissance and Enlightenment. We might say that is modernity in its best sense. In its worst sense, the modern age is characterized by the Promethean ambition to do whatever one wishes and protect those choices against criticism by declaring all values subjective and equal.

On this view, human mastery extends to the farthest extent of the cosmos and to the deepest realms of morality. Not surprisingly, this is what Father Schall has in mind when he describes "the basic thesis" of his book:

the modern age, by its articulated philosophical suppositions, infused into political and economic life, into human life in this world, something that it cannot and was not intended to bear by its own resources . . . .

Whatever cannot be grasped by the methods of modernity is said not to exist, not to be accessible. This narrowing of focus represents a deflection of philosophy from its proper object which is *all that is* (129).

A question raised, but never quite answered, by Father Schall's book is whether we must reduce modernity only to this worst, Promethean expression. Is the modern age only a playground for the hubris of those who recognize nothing beyond the ego, or is there a better sense in which we can understand the modern age that need not mean Father Schall is wrong–but only that he might tighten his focus a bit?

The Modern Age is not reminiscent of Jacques Maritain's *The Peasant of the Garonne* (Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1968) in structure or method. But Maritain, who in his own way always was a powerful advocate for the potential of "the modern democracies," expressed recrimination and worry in his final book that the "demagogic excess and aggressive conformism" of postwar democratic freedom did not bring "very encouraging or enlightening" results but, instead, an idealism about social and political freedom that encourages "illusion" and "meanness" (25).

Indeed, like Father Schall, Maritain reminds us that "Man will never be *Master and Possessor* of nature and history" (201). In *The Modern Age*, Father Schall suggests a debt to Maritain's later intuitions that "something intellectually may have gone seriously wrong" during the middle decades of the twentieth century (60).

We know that Father Schall sees the goods that can be found in modern political ideas. A 1978 essay praised Lincoln's formulation of "government of the people, by the people, for the people" as "[an affirmation of] the best form of government," and *The Modern Age* finds him quoting approvingly from Leo Strauss that, "[Modern political philosophy] is the highest form of the mating of courage and moderation"(122).

But his own judgments in this latest book find Father Schall significantly more skeptical about what possibilities for human good exist in modern political thought, dominated as it is by "The notion that living for future time is the purpose of human existence," which is a characteristic of the modern age and "the most lethal political idea ever floated" (8).

Father Schall rejects as a "formula for turmoil everywhere" the promise of the modern age to achieve the "best regime" with democratic institutions, a free market, the rule of law, and a doctrine of individual rights (137).

Yet, is not Christianity itself one source of the problems described in *The Modern Age*? Father Schall credits Eric Voegelin's insights into modernity's distorted eschatology throughout his book, yet in his account of the "most lethal political idea ever floated" Father Schall ignores the role of St. Paul, whose ambiguous hope for the second coming of Christ in his own lifetime became the seed for a sectarian strain that offered the possibility for perfection of man in this world (*CW* 17, *OH* IV, 314).

The Modern Age gives the impression that Father Schall, quite properly frustrated with modernity as "a philosophic notion" and with great zeal to de-consecrate that idea, has been a bit quick to stress the possibility of realizing the virtues of classical philosophy and Christianity and equally quick to abandon hopeful prospects he once found in the modern age (9).

Three chapters form the core of Father Schall's argument–"Judgment in Modernity," "What is 'Politics?'" and "Revelation and Political Philosophy." These chapters chart the path from revelation through philosophy to politics, and they are quite straightforward in their presentation of Straussian political ideas and the arguments of John Paul II in *Fides et Ratio* as Pope Benedict has elaborated them in his encyclical letters.

What follows, in a chapter promisingly titled "Actual Regimes," is rather disappointing. Six pages into that chapter, Father Schall announces his intention to describe "what a non-ideological but healthy polity in the modern world might look like" (134). It is an enticing promise for any reader, and its ambition again reminds us of Maritain as much as it harkens back to the 1978 essay where Father Schall grappled with the idea of the "best regime." Here Father Schall prefers to speak in a more Aristotelian language of "actual regimes" than in Platonic terms of "best regimes."

Father Schall's treatment of "Actual Regimes" breaks no new ground between traditional and modern views, as he has described them, and devotes only six-pages to a selection from John Paul's and Benedict's social doctrine. These popes have sought to restore an idea "not too far from what Jefferson wrote" in the Declaration, that of the "language of reason which is common to everyone" (139). But "free elections, a free market, and human 'rights'" without that common language of reason are an inadequate bulwark "when modern states have had to confront Muslim states" (139).

This confrontation appears as though it may be the unstated motivation for *The Modern Age.* Certainly Pope Benedict's 2005 lecture at the University of Regensburg is an important text frequently cited in Father Schall's book.

Like Maritain in the tumult of the 1960's Father Schall is living through a civilizational crisis that began for us in September of 2001. And, like Maritain, *The Modern Age* suggests that this crisis has taken a toll on Father Schall's confidence in the future of political life in the West.

NOTE

[Father Schall has now retired from full-time teaching. He gave his farewell address at Georgetown University on December 7, 2012. It may be read HERE .–*ed*]